

WHY MULES ARE EXCEPTIONAL

MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

- The mule has the Strength to tolerate prolonged and Strenuous Use of his muscles (inherited from his sire, the donkey jack.)
- The mule's Physical Structure allows him a more Diverse Range of Movement.
- The mule's Chest Muscle Group enhances the Mobility of the Front quarters
- The mule's Hindquarter Muscles enable him to kick Forward, Backward, and Sideways
- Superior Tough Hooves, and a unique Resistance to Parasites and Disease

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www.EmilyCowgirlsDream.Com
www.MuleTalk.Net or www.LuckyThreeRanch.Com/Podcast-Appearances/

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

The Mules are in the corral. Welcome to Mule Talk. And I'm Cindy K. Roberts, your host. And, our author, TV personality and world-renowned mule trainer, Meredith Hodges of the Lucky Three Ranch.

We're back on. And what is on your mind, Meredith?

Meredith Hodges:

Every day is fun for me with these Longears because of the way that I've learned to interact with them. It has taken a long time with a lot of challenges, but they truly are exceptional animals and can teach you a lot if you let them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yes, they are. So let's talk about that. You wrote an article, Why Mules are Exceptional, so share that with us.

Meredith Hodges:

We talked about how developing their body is really important. They are different from horses. They have a lot of smooth muscle that improves their agility and their athletic ability. Mules are able to easily kick forward, backward and sideways, so if you annoy them, be careful where you are standing! That's just one thing that makes mules exceptional right off the bat. They used to use culled mares when breeding for mules, so they were rather rough-looking with large heads, Roman noses, crooked legs and knobby knees. They saved their best mares for quality horse breeding. The mules bred from culled mares were not very pretty so most people preferred to ride horses. ***But these days, mules are bred from quality jacks and mares and are quite beautiful!*** You'll see the *agility* and *flexibility* exhibited in mule babies going absolutely nuts while running along beside their mothers in the fields. They do all kinds of things that if horse babies tried, they would just fall down. But mules just get out there with their silly antics and move! They look like they are just floating, twisting and turning across the top of the ground!

When mules are first born, they can get on their feet really fast. It's important to catch your mule baby quickly for *imprinting*. Mule babies are strong, durable and when they're ready to nurse the mare they are voracious about it! Mule foals inherit the best qualities from the jack and the mare. He inherits his smooth muscle and strength from the jack as well as incredible intelligence and stamina. He inherits his size, beauty and athleticism from the mare. Mules have more long muscle and less bulk muscle. That's why mules have so much more *athletic ability* than the horse and are actually able to jump high fences from a stand still.

There are points to consider when deciding what jack to use for breeding. People often think the jack determines the height of the mule, but that is not necessarily true. The mare determines the height and the mule will be roughly the same height as the mare, up to 2" taller or 2" shorter than the mare. The jack determines the thickness of bone. If you're breeding for a pack mule, it's good to have that thick bone and a mule that is not too tall. It makes it easier to load the pack and they can carry more weight. When my interest began with mules, they were primarily used for farming, packing, and pulling. For all these activities, the thickness of bone was important so Mammoth Jacks were used most often when breeding mules.

You can breed mules from any size mare, but if you want more *athletic ability, agility and flexibility* you would want to breed a saddle mare with a Large Standard, or Standard jack, to produce a mule with a more refined bone structure. Select the type of mare that possesses the particular traits for certain disciplines that you desire in your mule. For versatility in Western and English disciplines and General Trail Riding you would want to use Quarter Horse Mares, Appaloosa mares, Paint mares or Arabian mares. For Trail Riding on flat ground, you might want a mule bred from a Tennessee Walking Horse, A Fox Trotter or a Morgan mare. For Dressage and Combined Training, a mule bred from a Thoroughbred, Appendix Quarter Horse or Warm Blood would be preferable.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

With the onset of the Industrial Age and tractors taking the places of equines, I was afraid that mules and donkeys would no longer have a place in Modern America unless they could become a Recreational Equine. *For more details, go to my website at www.luckythreeranch.com and look under TRAINING/MULE CROSSING/CONTEMPORARY MULES & WHY MULES ARE EXCEPTIONAL.*

I wanted to see if mules were *agile and athletic* enough to compete with horses in all the different Equestrian Events that horses were doing. I began my career with mules by just starting out doing the simpler things that horses do like Gymkhana, Barrel Racing, Pole Bending and Flag Races. Training them for these *games* was really interesting! My mules would run straight and then right past the barrels (laughs), go straight through the poles with no lead changes and knocked them over instead of threading in and out. *They thought that was the way it was supposed to be done!* When I pulled on the reins to slow them down, they just bolted and ran off faster with me! I thought, *“This is not working out well.”* Clearly they did not respond in the same way that the horses did. They just took **CONTROL!** It was then I discovered that I could not take things too seriously. If I was going to be successful with mules, I was going to need a Good Sense of Humor! They obviously were not running off from fear.

When I put *Lucky Three Sundowner* in hobbles to teach him to Stand Still, he bolted and galloped off *IN THE HOBBOLES* to humble me and to show me that I had the *WRONG idea!* They seemed to enjoy moments like these!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

(laughs) That's when I discovered that they have an Alpha Personality. They are very durable animals and will always protect themselves. They have a very strong sense of Self-Preservation and want to do things *THEIR* way! Horses are much more introverted and are easily dominated. This challenge taught me that maybe I should be preparing my athlete to do these things and not jump right into it. And, I would need to make them think that everything was *THEIR* idea!

Meredith Hodges:

I had to *slow down!* I discovered that the only way to start developing Good Posture and Core Muscle was going to have it happen first through Leading Training in the Hourglass Pattern and not through riding. I had come face to face with the mule's *INTELLIGENCE!* Even my mules knew that you don't just launch into a game and play it! You have to do exercises that solidify the *core* and symmetrically develop the elements that support the bones in the skeleton, if you don't want to risk getting injured. As I said, Longears have a very strong sense of Self-Preservation. I fumbled through all kinds of Ground Work, experimenting with what worked and what didn't. I was under the false impression that humans were the most intelligent animal on the planet. ***Boy, was I wrong...and arrogant!*** The mules definitely put me in my place and humbled me whenever I needed it! The reason people thought they were smarter than animals is because they developed tools and used them. Since, I have learned that animals use all kinds of *tools* and mules have plethora of ways to solve problems both with and without *tools!* They even make *tools*, too! Read more on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under ***TRAINING/MULE CROSSING/LIVING WITH LONGEARS, REFLECTING ON LONGEARS & IN APPRECIATION OF MULES.***

After two years of excessive Ground Work, we graduated and began Under Saddle Training with my Dressage Instructor/Trainer Melinda Weatherford. Dressage was well-suited for mules because of its slow, step by step process of gradual body conditioning with clearly defined goals along the way.

In Dressage, equines are required to progress through certain levels beginning with Training Level and each level has four tests with specific attainable goals integrated into the patterns. For instance, the tests in Training Level focus on Forward Motion. Horses can generally complete one Level per year, but with the Advanced Intelligence and Alpha Personality of the mule, it took a bit longer at each level because they challenge *everything!* I discovered it took me two years and six months for each Level to be completed. *For more details, go to my website at www.luckythreeranch.com and look under TRAINING/MULE CROSSING/ASSETS OF THE MULE IN EQUESTRIAN SPORT, DRESSAGE EXPLAINED & USING DRESSAGE TRAINING WITH MULES.*

During our time with *Lindy*, I discovered even more *holes* in my preparatory Ground Work. My best Dressage mule was truly committed to the work we were doing. He had been the *1984 World Champion Reining Mule*, but after he won the *World Championship in Reining*, he did not like *Reining* anymore. He showed his discontent with *Reining* by just running through the bridle quite frequently until I just gave up doing any *Reining* at all. I was happy to see him really engaged in the Dressage training. ***Mules definitely have their specific likes and dislikes.*** They make very definite choices in their lives and the first choice is whether they like you or not. ***So, if you want to buy a mule, you don't pick him, you let him pick YOU!***

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs) Right.

Meredith Hodges:

So I was spending roughly two years at every level, but I was perfecting each Level when I did them. I wasn't really progressing all that fast, but I was getting the results I wanted and I was getting excited by the success. I watched my mules in the pasture during turnout while they were just playing and saw all the different moves they could conceivably do with a rider in the future.

I observed how their balance was improving with the Ground Work we were doing which only made all their antics that much more interesting. I found out that my Arabian mules, for example, could easily do a *Capriole* on their own. That is: jumping into the air and kicking straight back with their hind legs. They were out there galloping around, launching themselves into the air and kicking at each other. I was witnessing an Advanced Level Dressage move and thought they really *CAN* do Dressage! Totally Cool!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:
That indicated to me that if I could harness that movement in any way it would be spectacular. Of course they would always need to be the ones in charge! (laughing) I thought, if I'm patient enough I can do all the steps leading up to the Advanced Levels, then enhance their performance on the Drive Lines and eventually ride them in the Advanced Moves. How exciting that would be!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs) Right.

Meredith Hodges:
Granted, I never reached quite that Level. However, I did achieve Fourth Level Dressage with my *Reining* mule. He loved it so much I never had to use a Full Bridle with him. We did it all in an Eggbutt Snaffle Bridle. I did try on the Full Bridle ONCE! He threw such a fit, that I immediately took it off and let him have things HIS way! His way was dancing like a Ballerina doing *Piaffe*, trotting in place in slow motion and doing *Passage*... floating over the ground in a slow motion trot. He was doing *Canter Pirouettes* that are similar to a *Reining* spin, but cantering tiny circles with his hind quarters while doing a 360-degree turn without planting the pivot foot.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

As we progressed, we *Danced to Music* during our workouts to enhance our balance, rhythm and cadence. Our favorite piece of music was the *Emperor's Waltz* by Johann Straus. Even the Leading Exercises were a lot less boring when we were doing them to music. So we found things that we could do at the boring Levels to keep things fun and interesting. At one point, I thought my Dressage mule might also like Jumping, but that was a bust! His Daddy was a Mammoth Jack and he was really clumsy and uncoordinated through the low jumps. I didn't even dare to try anything higher. He was a real Ballerina in Dressage, but certainly NOT a Jumper.

From First Level Dressage through Second Level Dressage was the hardest. The fun in Dressage began at Third Level. Before that I did so many circles it made me dizzy every day! I kept asking Lindy, "*Oh God, when can I stop doing circles?*" It, it was (laughs) just tedious. Lindy replied, "*When you're **balanced** on a circle.*"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

When you get your balance perfect, then you've got *core strength* around those bones and when they are in balance, mules will *stay* healthy and are much more *versatile* animals than horses. They are *Exceptional Animals* that are durable, more resistant to parasites and disease, and don't have to eat as much. They cost much less to maintain than horses and ponies.

I can have all my equines on the same feed program and only make adjustments according to their size, but they get all the nutrition that they need. I feed their oats mix in the evenings and their oats are not increased except when they are rewarded during lessons. I put vitamins in the oats mix and use just enough oats to put the vitamins in with them. I found keeping their hooves really hard with pre-mixed feeds was an exercise in futility. It was making their feet soft. I thought, well, this isn't very good. How about we just stay at the one and a half cups to two cups of the oats, Sho Glo Vitamins and Mazola Corn oil?

I opted to go without corn, barley, and all of those other grains that they put in those mixes. Corn is really bad for them. It's very hot. You need to remember, these guys are desert animals. They do well on the prairie and in the desert. They eat only the things that keep their bodies healthy. Their hooves need to stay hard because if they start collapsing, they're in trouble. As they aged, I found that adding *HOOF POWER* to their oats mix helped a lot.

For more details about feeding and maintenance look on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under *TRAINING/TRAINING TIPS #5 – #8, TRAINING/MULE CROSSING ARTICLES/ OWNING AN EQUINE IS SERIOUS BUSINESS PT 1 & PT 2* or you can purchase your own copies of my *TRAINING MANUALS: TRAINING WITHOUT RESISTANCE, EQUINE MANAGEMENT & DONKEY TRAINING* or *EQUUS REVISITED*.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Donkeys are in sand all the time on the desert and in wet weather. They do get into the High Country where there are lots of rocks and they are also built for this kind of endurance, Longears have *ultimate vigor* in their whole makeup so their bodies are built for all this hardship. Keeping their feet really nice, healthy and hard is a chore because generally Farriers are not schooled in trimming Longears whose angles are a lot steeper than horses. I discovered that putting a very small amount of Mazola corn oil in their oats helps tremendously with their hooves, hair coats and digestive tract regularity. My vet tried to keep our 41 year old mini mule fat by adding more corn oil, but it didn't add weight, it just made his coat greasy. It was too much oil. Be careful of all the advice that people want to give you. Most of it is bogus. For more details about Longears Hooves look on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under *TRAINING/ MULE CROSSING ARTICLES/HOOF DIFFERENCES IN HORSES, DONKEYS & MULES*

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith

And I rescued two of my own mules that were sold when they were three years old. I got them back when they were 16 and 17 years old. Those two mules died when they were 28, but they still did better after coming back home. The average lifespan for a mule these days with normal care is from 20 to 25 years. With the development of my Core Strength, there was added value to these two mules' lives going beyond 20 to 25 to 28 years old. The ones I have now are living well into their 30s. Their average lifespan now is about 34, 35 years old. And in Franklin's case, he made it all the way to 41!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow. That's amazing.

Meredith Hodges:

All these different things that you do with them *DO* make a difference. The other thing that the jack contributes is the *Intelligence*. And the intelligence in these guys is just extraordinary. I'm finding that there are very few introverted mules. If they are introverted, it's because of the way that they're being maintained. People think they can just go ahead and throw them in a big pen or a big pasture and then they don't have as much to clean up. They don't realize that they just relocated the manure, germs and viruses in it. But they have also limited their ability to build a meaningful relationship with their equine.

They try to lower their own workload and in doing so they compromise the *eagerness* and the *exceptional interest* of the mule. They dampen his *sense of humor* and they *dampen his desire to play*. When the pen gets dirty, the mule thinks, "*Oh, well, you don't care, so I don't care.*" ***Then their sense of humor kicks in and they humble you by spreading that manure all over the place.***

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

A lot of people ask me, "*How do I train my mule to go in one place?*" Well, it's not exactly like that. It's not how you train your mule, it's how do you *let your mule train you?*

It's a major chore, but if you clean it up every day, then they think, "*Oh, she cares about me. I will make it easier for her. I'll just go in one place.*"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. (laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

If you are doing the right things, then he will do the things that you want him to do. If you keep his pen clean, he's only going to poop and urinate in that one place. Even groups of equines are like that together. If you have a stall and run, leave it open. Don't close him up in the stall and he won't mess up the stall. He'll use it for a bedroom.

Meredith Hodges:

In the stalls, we use pine shavings. Pine shavings are healthy and, yes, they will nibble on them a little bit, but if you're feeding them correctly, they won't even do that. If you don't confine them to the stall, they definitely won't do that. They'll go out in the pen and amuse themselves out there. If you leave the stall door open, they will use the stall as a place to sleep. And if the bedding is thick enough, it will be comfortable for them and they won't want to mess it up with poop and pee. They only do that when you *cheat* on the bedding!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

I've adjusted their pens so that they always have a shed to go in under whether they're turned out or whether they're in their main holding areas. We construct the sheds and the stalls so that the ground is higher in the sheds and stalls for proper drainage. Then they have a place to go to stay dry. That way their feet don't get mushy from standing in moisture. Don't be fooled when they stand out in the rain or snow. That is just another way for them to take a *shower* and keep their hair coats clean. When they are ready to dry, they will go into the shed.

The shed should be higher than the ground around it so you have a dry area to put feed. It's not safe to hang hay nets in there, but you can put in standing feeders. ***They're healthiest when they're allowed to graze with their heads down.*** It stretches their spine and keeps them from getting *Kissing Spine*. They need to spend a lot of time when they're grazing and when they're eating with their heads down. I like to make the ground higher inside and then line the shed with Rubber Mats.

Try not to feed them more hay than they will eat because all they're going to do is spread it around, pee on it and waste it. These are intelligent animals you're dealing with, so you learn to play the game with them. Talking about playing, if you put those Rubber Mats inside a shed or stall and you don't fix it so that they don't slide easily, they'll drag the mats right out of the shed. They will drag them around the pen and play with them. You come along and say, "*Why did you do that?*" And they'll just turn around and smile at you! (laughing).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

At the end of the shed where it's open, we put in two-by-twelves across the whole front of it. Then when we grade the dirt, we grade it down so that the mats are going to fit down inside behind the boards. Then we put the angle iron on the top of the two-by-twelves because they will chew on that wood. But if they bite into metal, they're less likely to do that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

In the stalls, we auger a hole about two feet in diameter in the middle of the stall, bore down four feet and fill it up with inch and a half rock to the level of the dirt.

Then we put in four inches of pea gravel and put our mats on top of that. At the stall doors, we use two-by-sixes in front of the doors to keep those mats from sliding out and to keep the pea gravel in the stall. If the stall floor is six inches higher than it is in the alleyway or that it is in the run, your stalls will not flood. The lower ground will send the water away from your stalls. They will drain properly, stay dry in the stalls and give your animal a place to go to keep those feet dry. It's really important to do that. And when you do those kinds of things, they're so smart that they realize what you're doing when you manage them like that. They think, "*Oh, she really cares about me. That's so cool.*" Learn more about maintenance for clean barns and Insect Control on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under *TRAINING/MULE CROSSING/INSECT CONTROL*.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

When I got into Dressage and Combined Training, I needed a place to measure my progress. And that meant going to Horse Shows because the Mule Shows were mostly fun shows. Although Longears Shows had judged classes, none of us were really schooled in the Equestrian Disciplines like the riders were in Horse Shows. The competition bar was set high in most Horse Shows. They were an ideal place to measure your progress.

I wanted to compete in the Horse Shows, but they didn't want to let me in because I was riding a mule. They had all kinds of excuses for it: "*Your mule is not a HORSE!*"

"*My mule is half horse and your rules say HORSES. Even though he is only half horse, he should be able to compete.*" And I started a fight with them. That went over like a rock!

They said, “*Your mule is going to scare the horses and we're not equipped to compete against mules. It's going to ruin our shows, make people angry and not be fun anymore.*” I decided that this was going to require a different and more tactful approach if I really wanted to ride in the Horse Shows. My mules were clearly not welcome and I couldn't just show up and be there. They wouldn't even let me on the grounds. Read more about our experience with Dressage & Combined Training on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under **TRAINING/MULE CROSSING/BEAS FIRST COMBINED TRAINING EVENT & DANCING WITH MULES.**

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

I was thinking about what my mules had taught me about taking care of them properly. I was thinking, mules are so superior to these horses, if they do compete against the horses, they *will* win eventually. We're going to get good enough in whatever discipline and we're going to be better than them. I heard about *Maryster Farms Kit* competing in Combined Training in Kentucky. I also heard about *Hambone* at Fort Carson in Colorado who competed against the horses in Jumping and beat them all so badly that the American Horse Show Association refused to allow mules compete in Jumping Classes anymore.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

They explained to me that the reason for no mules allowed was that these Equestrian Events had taken hundreds of years to organize in different areas across the United States and the World. The best riders and horses were selected to compete in the Olympics and compete against different countries. We needed our best riders and our best horses. They established a points system and put it in conjunction with all the Approved Shows at the Upper Levels. They couldn't allow mules to compete because if they placed high, they would offset the points system and the selection of the best riders and horses. The Olympics would never allow a mule to compete.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Hm.

Meredith Hodges:

The way they explained it to me made a whole lot of sense. So I thought if we really want to learn and be great equestrians with our Longears, then we needed to be polite and considerate to get permission to ride with them at the Lower Levels where the points weren't important. We would not ask to ride at the Upper Levels against the horses at all.

So I began calling Horse Show organizers and asked, "*Can I please compete with you? You do realize that you are superior in all kinds of Equestrian Disciplines and I want to excel with my mules. However, I won't be able to do it unless I can measure my success with true Professionals.*"

It was particularly difficult to get in, especially in the Dressage and Combined Training world where competition was really stiff! I said, "*Well, if you're afraid that my mule will upset the horses... I know that mules smell differently and the horses are picking up on that. I know that the riders on these horses have a hard enough time controlling them and calming them down when horses are inherently spookier and flightier than mules and because mules have that donkey freeze instinct and not always flight instinct, I will do anything you ask if I can just show.*"

*"If you want me to go ahead and stay by my trailer until my name is called, I'm fine with that. And I understand that in future, if we have some Upper Level mules coming up, then we need to organize the same kinds of shows like you did and have **like** animals competing against **like** animals."* That was the attitude that I assumed when I talked to people. Some people would let us in the shows and some people would not.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm. Right.

Meredith:

So it was really kind of interesting. Mules are exceptional, but they're also, extremely intelligent and very smart. And as you're doing all of these Upper Level movements and paying attention to all these details, you begin to realize that you have to work on Improving your Riding Ability. I learned that seeking the Postural Balance and developing my mule's Core Strength enabled him to *follow* my Seat. We established Balance and Harmony together! Mules are famous for being strong in the bridle, and when they don't like something, they run off. ***But when you take time and put in the right kind of work together, it's a whole different story of mutual communication and trust!*** Read more details on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under TRAINING/MULE CROSSING/ACHIEVING BALANCE & HARMONY.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. (laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

(laughs) When you spend adequate time on all the details, there's an illumination that takes place. As I was competing in all these different events over time like Gymkhana, judged English and Western events and Jumping and Driving, I began to realize that the way my mule was moving was extraordinary. He was getting stronger. All of my mules were getting stronger in their Good Postural Balance. When I rode them, it was like floating over the ground. None of my mules were hard gaited.

They were like riding on air and light in the bridle. Oh, my God, I didn't have to do anything with the *reins* on the bridle. I didn't have to do anything with my *legs*. All I had to do was move them from my *seat*. That's when I went *bridleless* on everything that we did. *Everything!*

I used only my Verbal Commands and Body Language. I even went *bridleless* with the Drive Lines hitched to a cart. I decided I was not going to use the Lines, just my voice. I took them down the road and drove them. If they started to waver, I'd say, "*Gee, get over to the right. Walk on.*" When they got on a straight line, I'd said "*Whoa.*" They'd stop four-square. I said, "*Back.*" They would *Rein Back* absolutely straight without using the Lines at all. It was simply extraordinary.

It just goes to show you how *exceptional* these Longears really are when you're a good partner and a good teacher.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Something that I have found out is that they are so incredibly smart. They'll pick it up the first time if you're clear in your request. And usually-

Meredith Hodges:

Absolutely.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

... the rider or the handler will repeat and repeat and do repetitious instructions on it simply because the rider or handler hasn't mastered it

Meredith Hodges:

Exactly right, Cindy. ***So you do have to be very cognizant about what you are doing when you are interacting with them because everything as simple as going to the stall and retrieving them makes a difference. They are ALWAYS learning from you.***

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Never go into the pen to retrieve them. Always ask them to come to you and when they do, give them their crimped oats reward ***PROMPTLY! If you play the game of chase in the pen and that's what you're teaching them to do!***

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

If you stand and wait at the gate until they come and drop their head into the halter, then that's what you're going to get from them going forward. I'm seeing so many more people that are having tremendous success with their animals. People are learning that their Longears take them quite *literally* and learn honestly from their own actions.

This brings to mind a person that I like to follow on Facebook, *Laurie Wilson* and her mule, *Toby Jack*. She does all the right kinds of things to build his Core Strength. but she likes to do tricks and things that are fun to do with *Toby Jack*. He's such a character! She has him sit down on a bean bag and then she'd dress him up for the different holidays and take pictures and post them on Facebook. She also started him with Dressage Under Saddle and then Bareback. He's a tall mule. She had some trouble getting on until they figured out a solution to the problem. I don't know who taught who, but I think *Toby* might have taught her this trick. He put his head down right between her legs and launched her up onto his back.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughing). There you go.

Meredith Hodges:

I remember when I first got my Rollerblades. I only had a short stretch of sidewalk in front of the house. I didn't have much concrete around here because of the animals. I used to Roller Skate on four wheels, but I wanted to learn how to Rollerblade. So I fetched *Mae Bea CT*, my best bridleless mule. You can verbally tell her what to do and she does it. I led her onto the sidewalk at one end and asked her to stand four-square. She did and stood motionless. I had already done a lot of work with Verbal Commands and Body language. I taught her to *Rein Back*, move sideways on both sides and move forward from raising my hands. I even taught her to move backwards when I tugged on her tail. I put on my Rollerblades, went behind her, grabbed her tail said, "*Walk on.*" At first, she thought I wanted her to walk backwards, but after one step, I told her, "*No, Walk on!*" She corrected herself right away and pulled me down the sidewalk. "*WOW!*" I thought, "*This is really fun!*" At the end of the sidewalk she stopped, turned and gave me a look with a smile, "*Oh, you're so silly! And the point of this is What?*" (laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs). Way to go.

Meredith Hodges:

You will see people that like to *ski* behind their animals in the snow or in water. I used to drag people behind us on an inflatable tire to keep things light weight. And I also made sure that my mule was pulling them on a straight line so it didn't pull the saddle one way or another to throw her off balance. That would just interfere with her Postural Core Strength in a Good Balance. It could cause sore places in her body and wouldn't be much fun anymore. In the winter after a good snow, I made sure my mules were shod with Borium beads on their shoes for traction and we dragged each other around the hay field. It was loads of fun. I think the mules even enjoyed it! They do seem to prefer doing things with people than just grazing in the pasture like most horses. ***You do need to realize that it could get a little dangerous without adequate physical preparation and training.***

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

They need to have the Core Muscle Strength to pull that tire with extra weight and be tolerant and comfortable with the noises behind. In order to be ***safe and stay safe***, they need to do the right kind of preparation work for all the activities that you think you would enjoy. Then they know what to expect from you and can learn to act accordingly. I remember reading in one of your books about the time you grabbed one of your mule's tails in the pasture and got kicked in the face. When we are first interacting with our animals, we think we should be able to do whatever we think they should do. But no, you can't just do *things* right off the bat, but you ***CAN*** do things to prepare for those kinds of interactions with your animal.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs). Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

I was always trying to be proactive about worst case scenarios and how I could train to prevent bad things from happening. When I did the Verbal Commands and Body Language training with my mules, I set things up for success. I was thinking about what would happen if I was up into the mountains and fell off, broke my leg and couldn't get back on? When you're Trail Riding, ***Rule #1 is never go riding alone! The Buddy System is the best preventative medicine.*** Riding in the mountains with a cell phone won't do you much good either because there's generally no service up there.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Another thing I thought would be important was to teach my mules to drag me with my arm through the stirrup. I saw this done on one of the old cowboy movies! I learned it again when I got sunstroke. When the temperatures were over 100, I was in my Open Arena working three animals Under Saddle in the Hourglass Pattern. I would tie up two and ride one at a time.

But I got sunstroke and had to go sit down against the fence and leave *Sir Lancelot* standing alone in the middle of the arena. He looked at me and was concerned. He came over to me where I was sitting on the sidelines on the ground just trying to cool off a little bit. He put his head down and nudged my shoulder, "*I think we need to go in now. What do you think?*" (laughing)

I looked up at him and said, "*I think you're right, but I can't get up.*"

Then he stuck his head underneath my arm and picked me up, "*Well then, here, let me help you.*"

He walked me to the arena gate and hitch rail. I asked my assistant to go ahead and grab the other two mules and lead them back to the barn. *Sir Lancelot* let me lean on him all the way back to the barn. And it gave me the idea that it might be really useful to teach all of my mules how to drag me from the stirrup. If I'm on the ground with a broken arm or a broken leg, then I won't be able to get back on, but I might be able to loop my arm through the stirrup and get dragged to safety..

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs). Right.

Meredith Hodges:

I went ahead and taught my mules how to drag me in a controlled situation. I just kept my hands on the reins with one arm stuck through the stirrup and asked them to “*Walk on,*” and drag me a little ways and then *halt*. Then I would let loose and go to their head to reward them with the crimped oats and said, “*Thank you! You did GREAT.*” Then I waited until they were done chewing their oats reward before we proceeded. The things I asked were not any different from the things they learned in their Ground Work Training. I was just doing them from a different *lying down* position on the ground. If I hadn’t spent extensive time with the Preparation Training, they could have kicked my head in!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs). Awesome.

Meredith Hodges:

It really *IS* how you interact with your animal more than how you train them. Developing a meaningful relationship through Verbal Commands and Body Language determines the Depth of the Communication between you. This is how they really know how much you care about them and how *THEY* can show you how much they care about *YOU!* *Allow them train you as much as you think you're training them.* Because when you do, they're smart enough to learn and can be *VERY GOOD!* My mules all learned how to *act* in my various ads and commercials.

I did a commercial for one of the things that I call ***TEACH YOUR MULES AMAZING THINGS***. See these video clips on my website at www.luckythreeranch.com under *TRAINING/INSPIRATIONAL VIDEOS/TEACH YOU MULES AMAZING THINGS*. I didn't know I could teach my mules amazing things, but in the first one we had 3 soldiers talking to each other inside of a plane. I put my trailer on top of a four-foot embankment that we built I loaded one mule in backwards with two mules facing him. They were all wearing army helmets and the *Sergeant* was giving the orders.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

My mules thought I was being some kind of crazy again, "*She wants us to do WHAT? Parachute? What's THAT mean?*" (laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

Then I had to figure out how I was going to make them *parachute*. I chased them out the back of the trailer and they all leaped off the 4-foot embankment. We caught them in mid-air with the cameras.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, no. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

We had a Skytrak so I put Bea in a Rescue Harness. She looked at me with a scowl, "*I will concede if you **really** have to do this.*"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

We lifted her up in the air and slowly let the Skytrak come back down to the ground. In EDIT, we used Photoshop to attach a parachute to the video and put the commercial together. It turned out really good! Boy, did *Bea* get mad at me about that. She wouldn't speak to me for a week, but she did it."

Another one we did was of my neighbors walking down the road and noticed my house shaking. They were saying, "*What's going on?*" Then the camera zooms in and shows one of my mules walking through the front door and into the house. We shot footage of one mule in the laundry room putting clothes into the washing machine. In another shot the same mule was mopping the kitchen floor. In one more shot, her sister had dusted the dining room table with her tail!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, (laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

It's so easy to teach Longears how to do anything you want to do as long as you are polite, considerate and without an abusive attitude. They *WILL* humble you otherwise! It makes interacting with them a whole lot of fun. But also, when you want them to be all business, they will be. They *LOVE* being with people! That's why all my mules not only did all this fun stuff, but they went into numerous Horse Shows and Longears Shows and placed at the very top! We never quit a discipline until we beat the horses in that discipline! We spent 20 years just showing and have had many more years together! My mules are now in their mid-thirties and still going strong! My mules are simply *extraordinary*!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith

Mules truly ARE exceptional. They can do everything that horses do and then some. I have only described a few things here that I have done with my mules, but at the *Bishop Mule Days World Show* in Bishop, California over Memorial Week each year, you can see hundreds of exhibitors and their mules having loads of fun together. At *Bishop Mule Days*, they even rope steers from chariots with mules! ***With mules, you are only limited to you own imagination! If the mules don't like what you're trying to make them do, they just won't comply. It's as simple as that! Mules exemplify the true spirit of the American Wild West!*** To see more about Bishop Mule Days, go to my website at www.luckythreeranch.com and look under ***TRAINING/VIDEO ON DEMAND/THE ROAD TO BISHOP, THE BISHOP ALL STARS & THE BISHOP EXPERIENCE.***

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, my gosh. Yes. Yes.

Another cool episode. And that wraps it up for another episode of Mule Talk. Meredith's website is LuckyThreeRanch.com, and you can call her at +1 800-816-7566. And I can be reached through my website, EveryCowgirlsDream.com. Don't forget, hit the subscribe button.

Gotta go. My mule is looking for me.

Speaker 3:

Mule Talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production.

Meredith's website is luckythreeranch.com, and you can call her at +1 800-816-7566. And I can be reached through my website, everycowgirlsdream.com. Gotta go, my mule is looking for me.

Mule talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production.

RESOURCES:

WEBSITE at www.LuckyThreeRanch.com /TRAINING:

- 1) Another Augie & Spuds Adventure
- 2) Chasity's Challenges
- 3) Longears Music Videos
- 4) Mule Crossing Articles
- 5) Mule Facts
- 6) Podcast Appearances
- 7) Training Tips
- 8) Rock & Roll: Diary of a Rescue
- 9) What's New With Roll?
- 10) Video On Demand
- 11) Wrangler's Donkey Diary

BOOKS/VIDEOS IN THE STORE:

- 1) Training Mules & Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Training
- 2) A Guide to Raising & Training Mules
- 3) Donkey Training
- 4) Training Without Resistance
- 5) Equine Management & Donkey Training
- 6) Equus Revisited Manual
- 7) Equus Revisited Video

- 8) Rock & Roll Documentary
- 9) Building the Jasper Carousel
- 10) LTR Hay Production
- 11) The Road to Bishop
- 12) The Bishop Experience
- 13) The Bishop All Stars
- 14) Walk On: Exploring Therapeutic Riding
- 15) Build of a Nation
- 16) Give Your Equine the Athletic Edge
- 17) For Children: www.JasperTheMule.com for books & videos